

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

THE DOMESTICATION OF GOD

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Advent is not simply a season to await the coming of Christmas. Much less is it simply a reenactment of ancient hopes long ago fulfilled. It is a time to review and enlarge our hopes to tap into the deepest hopes of the human race for the age that is to come. And then to prepare ourselves to encounter a mystery visible only to the eyes of faith: the fact that this humble birth so long ago, and in equally frail signs of love and justice all about us, the coming age has begun.

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THE DOMESTICATION OF GOD

Malachi 3:1-3

Luke 3:1-9

"The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight indeed, he is coming ... who can stand when he appears?" Malachi 3:2

In the 1630s, little more than a decade after the Pilgrims stepped off the Mayflower and onto Plymouth Rock, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was a going concern, its industrious citizens devoting their energy and imagination to living up to their image of themselves as a "city on a hill." The ministers and governors worked together to create and maintain a high level of public morality which in many ways was unique in history and admirable, based on an ideological or theological foundation proclaimed from the pulpits every Lord's Day. The Puritans knew what God wanted and assumed the heavy responsibility of enforcing what they knew God expected of them by law and judicial process. And along the way they began to assume that they knew exactly how God thought. And in that move they went terribly wrong: they domesticated and diminished God and turned religion from the public expression of awe before God's mystery, and gratitude for God's grace to a system by which public order is maintained.

And into that environment which is described by the term 'Puritanism' came a remarkable woman by the name of Anne Hutchinson. Professor William Placher of Wabash College retells her story in his important book *The Domestication of Transcendence*.

William and Ann Hutchinson, with their twelve children, sailed from England to join the Bay Colony. They settled outside Boston. The governor, John Winthrop, did not like Anne at all. He described her: "of a haughty and fierce carriage, of a nimble wit and active spirit and very voluble tongue, more bold than a man." William was elected to public office in 1634 and Anne was holding discussion groups in her home for sixty women. It was making the authorities and the ministers very nervous. The reason was that the women were talking about grace, about that radical Christian idea and that God's love is not contingent upon anything about us – even the state of our morals, and that Christianity is more about proclaiming and celebrating that good news than it is about maintaining public order, as admirable as that is. Anne and her friends were criticizing the ministers for failure of nerve.

It was pretty orthodox thinking, actually. But it bumped into the political and religious obsession with control and order. Why, if God's grace is poured out on all, the local drunk might be as likely to receive it as the governor or the preachers.

And so a campaign to discredit and malign Anne Hutchinson was organized. Thomas Hooker, one of its leaders, said, "I know there is wild love and joy enough in the world, as there is wild thyme and other herbs, but we would have garden love and garden joy of God's own planting." Hooker wanted nothing to do with a God who was not controlled, predictable, domesticated and even less with a woman who argued otherwise.

And so she was arrested, tried, banished to Rhode Island and then to New York where she and her entire family were killed by the native inhabitants. [See Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, p. 6, 103-107]

Professor Placher argues in a way that made me stop and think hard about what's going on these days in my own church, that from the beginning, the story of religion is at least in part the story of the human attempt to domesticate God, to know God so completely that there are no surprises, no unpredictability, no wildness. The story of religion, ancient and modern, is characterized by attempts, oftentimes tragic, to enforce a public order based on what religion thinks it knows about God and God's thinking and God's will and God's actions.

The problem is, God won't cooperate. There is about the God of the Hebrews a distinct note of unpredictability and surprise. And it is an appropriate reminder in a season of celebration which takes the most implausible, unpredictable, wildly improbable event that ever happened and absolutely tames it, domesticates it, adorns it with lovely comforting images. There is about Advent, someone said, a note of apprehension, or should be. When God comes, we should perhaps be at least a little concerned about the implications!

The anonymous prophet who wrote the last book in Hebrew scripture, the Book of Malachi, which means "messenger," wanted very much to make that point. And I made a very important discovery this time around. Malachi is the first writer in the history of literature to employ the "good news – bad news" dynamic.

Malachi: Good news – "The Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple."
Bad news – "Who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?"

There are plenty of irreverent asides that are very much in that spirit:

"Jesus is coming again (an announcement made at church headquarters in Louisville); what should we do?"

The Moderator answers, "Look busy."

Or, a Vatican spokesperson interrupts a high-level meeting of Cardinals and Bishops:
"We have good news and bad news. Good news – The Lord is coming. Bad news – he's coming to Salt Lake City."

Not so different in spirit from Malachi. "The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight is coming....but, he is like a refiner's fire and like a fuller's soap."

The good news is that God is faithful to the promise. God will come into human life. The not-so-good news is that it will happen in a way you are not expecting. It will be an energetic and dynamic appearance. Things will change. People will be held to account. New things will

happen. There is about Advent, rightly observed, at least a little uneasiness and a sense of the untamed, the wild, the passionate, the unpredictable.

That's why John the Baptist always shows up in the Advent texts. John sounds like a fulfillment of Malachi's prediction and Luke presents him brilliantly and with no little irony.

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea." It's the way you date a document. In the absence of a universal numbering system to indicate the year, you indicate who's in power. Luke starts at the top – with the Roman Emperor himself, the most awesome, powerful man in the world who sooner or later will conclude that he, the emperor, was god, and proceeds through the ranks: when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod ruler of Galilee, Philip his brother next door in Ituraea – all the way to the religious authorities, the high priests Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came ... to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

Get it? Not to the emperor or governor or ruler or high priest. Not in Rome, Caesarea, Jerusalem. We've domesticated it, but Luke's irony is brilliant. The Word of God comes – not to whom and where it is expected, anticipated, logical, sensible – but to a nobody who is the son of a nobody, existing in the wilderness.

It is wonderfully ironic and terribly important. The birth that we anticipate and which we celebrate is comforting. We interpret it – honestly and rightly – as an expression of God's intimate love, God's identification with our humanity, God's coming to be born in our hearts. But it is also the coming of God to all sorts of people: poor people, marginalized people, foreigners, people of other races and religions and nationalities. Before it is intimate and comforting, the birth is unexpected, unpredictable, and speaks of God who is like that – not subject to human control, not confined to human theology or morality or notions of public order.

In his wonderful best seller *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill tells the fascinating and heroic story of Irish-Celtic culture and how it preserved the best and highest of the older Roman civilization through the Dark Ages. While barbarians were burning books and plundering the cities of northern Europe, Irish monks were feverishly copying the ancient manuscripts, decorating them gorgeously and Irish culture was celebrating and nurturing music, poetry, prose and virtues like honor, loyalty, courage.

At the end of the book, Cahill looks forward to the future and he ends on a note that catches the spirit of Advent.

"The future may be germinating today, not in a boardroom in London or an office in Washington or a bank in Tokyo, but in some antic outpost or another – a kindly British orphanage in the foothills of Peru, a house for the dying in a back street of Calcutta run by a fiercely single-minded Albanian nun, a mission to Somalia by Irish social workers who remember their own Great Hunger, a nursery program to assist convict mothers at a New York prison – in some unheralded corner where a

great-hearted human being is committed to loving outcasts in an extraordinary way.” [*How The Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill, p. 217]

In some unheralded corner ... that sounds like Bethlehem of Judea ... God’s word came to the unheralded son of an obscure priest in the wilderness. So the Lord comes to his temple, the messenger in whom you delight, and Christ is born in the world not only in traditional, expected ways, but when a marginalized child is wrapped in the arms of human love, when a man dying of AIDS is surrounded by loving friends who will not abandon him, when the lonely elderly are embraced and where the comfortable social order is challenged by the fierce uncompromising love of those captivated by this Lord who comes in unexpected ways and who are fearless in naming injustice or oppression, whether it is the behavior of police or the military policies of the nation or the way we spend public revenue on educating the children.

Love is born and Christ comes in unexpected and unheralded corners of your life, in the love you experience for your own dearest ones, in the discomfort generated by your own awareness that change needs to happen in the world out there and the world is here, in your heart. Christ is born in the steady impetus you experience to forgive and reconcile with someone from whom you are separated. Christ comes as you reach across barriers and reconcile and build a new world. Love is born in new resolve and in commitments to give and live and love more. Christ comes when the bottom falls out of your life and there is nothing to hold on to except this improbable news that a baby was born in Bethlehem and God’s love is among us.

God is simply not confined to the intellectual categories, the moral constructs or the social expectations we have of God.

The birth of the child in Bethlehem means that God comes to you – on God’s terms, in God’s time.

Perhaps even in something as unlikely as a simple ritual by which we remember and celebrate the mystery that is God and God’s grace; bread broken and a cup shared.

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God of mystery, God of infinite love, of all the eating and drinking we will do, this will be the quietest and simplest. Come to us. Be near to us. Be born in our word and our hearts once again.

Amen.